



**Thrust Statement:** The way to Bethlehem's manger is through John the Baptist.

**Scripture Reading:** [Luke 3:1-18](#) [\[1\]](#).

This is the **season** of Advent; Advent is associated with the birth of Christ and His entrance into the world in the Incarnation. Generally, this celebration occurs over a four-week period - **beginning** December 1. Christmas **is a time** of joy. **It is a time** that the world as a whole remembers the coming of God in flesh. **It is a time** in which many people reflect upon the salvation offered to humanity through the atonement of Jesus on the cross of Calvary. **It is a time** in which people recall the words of Jesus in His conversation with Nicodemus.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son ([John 3:16-18](#)).

**It is a time** in which people recollect Luke's narrative about the birth of Jesus and the angels praising God and saying:

"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace to men on whom his  
favor rests"; ([Luke 2:14](#)).

#### ON THE WAY TO BETHLEHEM'S MANGER

In Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, one must first travel the scenic route of John the Baptist. Luke narrates the events leading up to the Bethlehem manger ([Luke 1:1-3:1-18](#)). Christians do not often include John the Baptist in their Christmas celebrations. And, perhaps, his absence from the Christmas story is not accidental. John is a very upsetting figure; nevertheless, in defiance of his looks, one encounters John in the Judean wilderness preparing the way of the Messiah ([Luke 3:3](#); [Matthew 3:1](#); [Mark 1:4](#)). In the wilderness, one sees John "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" ([Luke 3:3](#); [Matthew 3:11](#); [Mark 1:4](#)).

Following this forceful proclamation of repentance by John, Mathew adds a vivid portrait about his dress and food: "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey" ([Matthew 3:4](#)). John is clothed with camel's hair and he sweats under the desert sun. His beard and hair are streaked with dust, his feet and sandals covered with dirt. He reeks of destitution and of excitement and of stern chastisement. John's exterior appears to be out of place with the shepherds, angels, peace, and good will toward men ([Luke 2:8-14](#)). But, in spite of his exhibition of dress, his mission is to prepare the way of the Lord ([Mark 1:2-3](#)). Luke also gives additional information about John's ministry that is beyond his physical appearance:

He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-to make ready a people prepared for the Lord ([Luke 1:14-17](#)).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke have the story of John at the beginning of their Gospels. Before they tell the full story of Jesus, they begin with the Baptist. Thus, as we, too, explore our way to Bethlehem's manger, we begin with John in order that we may know how to accept the child wrapped in cloths and placed in a manger ([Luke 2:7](#)). When one admits John onto the Advent stage, there is something that is inflexible about his sharp call to repentance. Luke sounds the stage for John's messianic mission:

As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"A voice of one calling in the desert,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.  
Every valley shall be filled in,  
every mountain and hill made low.  
The crooked roads shall become straight,  
the rough ways smooth.  
And all mankind will see God's salvation' ([Luke 3:4-6](#)).

When John appears, the "Kingdom of God is near" ([Matthew 3:2](#)). It is not doing Christmas shopping, sending Christmas cards, preparing Christmas dinners, wrapping Christmas presents, or participating in Christmas plays. No, Christmas is not about these things, but, rather, it is about eternity. John is on the scene, "the Kingdom of God is near." In the words of Paul: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Galatians 4:4-5).

John came in order to prepare a people for the Lord. He prepares the people for the glory of the Lord, for visions of everlasting peace, for a new and eternal covenant, for living water, and for baptism with the Holy Spirit. Mark gives the substance of John's message:

After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am

not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit ([Mark 1:7-8](#)).

John, conscious of the coming One, shouts that "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" ([Luke 3:9](#)). Every decision that one makes, every act that one does, will be decisive for eternity - "every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." With the Baptist on the scene, it cannot be Christmas as usual. John is on the stage saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." ([Matthew 3:2](#)). Repent is the cry of John. With John's announcement about the coming of God's kingdom, people respond from the various regions to hear John. They need salvation. Matthew informs us that "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River" ([Matthew 3:5-6](#)).

There is great excitement in the air. The people look for the promised Messiah. Some think perhaps that John is the Christ:

**The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.** John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." **And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them** ([Luke 3:15-18](#)).

The people were living in great darkness. They needed light. Their lives, even as ours, were full of hurt, full of pain, full of despair; they were constantly living in the shadow of death. Thus, they were eager to hear the good news announced by John - forgiveness of sins. As a result of John's efforts in preaching that the "Kingdom of God is near," then, "all mankind will see God's salvation" ([Luke 3:6](#)). People flocked to hear this prophet of God. Upon their arrival, John explains that repentance is the way of receiving the Lord's salvation; repentance is preparation for the coming of Jesus. This news came as a shock to the Pharisees. They were not prepared to hear that God loves the humble, the meek, the poor in spirit, and the confessing sinner. John forcefully set forth that repentance is not simply a feeling, but rather, it is a transformation of one's actions; repentance is a change of how one lives. Every one was told to "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" ([Luke 3:7](#)).

For John, confession bears fruit in hearts transformed and in lives changed from the inside out. One's piety is not enough. "I repent" means to bring forth justice, to help bring about social change for the downtrodden, to eliminate grudges, to heal rupture between you and your spouse, to bring about reconciliation between you and your parents, and to bring about make-up between parent and child, and the end of animosities between Christians. The crowds ask John what repentance means. He responds by saying:

The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same. Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" Don't collect any more than you are required to, he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, And what should we do? He

replied, Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely-be content with your pay (Luke 3:11-14).

John demands that we live lives of righteousness, justice, and truth. Can you do this? Yes, but not in perfection. Are you perfect? Do you want to escape darkness and be delivered to light? Do you wish to be transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's dear Son? If so, you cannot rely upon your own righteousness. John preaches the good news to those in darkness. For John, God provides a way of salvation through the Lamb of God. John denies being the Christ, the one who brings forgiveness of sins. John, the apostle, also gives us the Baptist's own testimony:

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely,

"I am not the Christ."

They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said,

"I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'" ([John 1:19-23](#)).

Following John's announcement of his purpose, one finds him, on the next day, as he sees Jesus coming, exclaiming:

"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel" ([John 1:29-31](#)).

What does John require for receiving the Lord? Repentance and bearing fruit, says John. Not only did John begin his ministry with repentance, but it is significant that Jesus also began His ministry by calling upon people to **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near"** ([Matthew 4:17](#)). Matthew also informs us that Jesus "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people ([Matthew 4:23](#)). John also went about "preaching the good news of the kingdom" ([Luke 3:18](#)). What is the "good news"? It is, Jesus is God's way of salvation. Jesus offers salvation through faith in Him, not works. Jesus says, **"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life"** ([John 5:24](#)). Have you crossed over from death to life? Have you accepted Jesus as your atonement for your sins? Have you accepted Jesus as your mercy seat? Now **is the time** to reflect upon your salvation.

This is the season of Advent. **This is a time** of reflection upon the shepherds, angels, and the Bethlehem manger. Do you remember the words that the angel spoke to Mary, the mother of Jesus? The angel says, "you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Are you listening to the good news about salvation? Are you going to allow your sins and your unrighteousness to bar you from the manger. Do you

believe? Salvation is only "in and through" Jesus ([Romans 5:21](#)). It is only "in and through" Jesus that one can be delivered from God's wrath ([Romans 5:1-21](#)). It is only "in and through" Jesus that one can be delivered from the power of sin ([Romans 6:1-23](#)). It is only "in and through" Jesus that one can be delivered from the curse of the law ([Romans 7:1-25](#)). It is only "in and through" Jesus that can be delivered from condemnation ([Romans 8:1-39](#)).

Christmas **is a time** of meditation on the incarnation; **it is a time** of examination of your life; **it is a time** of contemplation about your relationship with God. Remember that you can only approach God "in and through" Jesus. He says, "**I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me**" ([John 14:6](#)).

As you consider this Advent season, don't forget that as one thinks about the incarnation, one passes through John on the way to Bethlehem's manger. John pointed to Jesus and declared, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me'" ([John 1:29-30](#)).

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*Preached: Grassy Church of Christ (Grassy, Alabama), November 30, 1997, 11 am Service.*

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## ENDNOTES

[\[1\]](#) Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the NIV.